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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses a portion of empirical data collected from a large sample of British factory workers and relates these workers' perception of the discretion available to them to their work satisfaction. Perceived discretion is measured for two sectors of work experience: first, discretion surrounding actual job performance; and second, direction involving participation in the world of work. The major conclusion suggested by the evidence presented is that job performance discretion is less significantly related to work satisfaction than workers' perceived discretion as to where and at what job they work. (Also included are a 29-item bibliography and some of the research data.) (Author)

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WORK DISCRETION AND WORK SATISFACTION: A STUDY OF BRITISH FACTORY WORKERS

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This paper presents and discusses a portion of empirical data collected from a large sample of British factory workers and relates these workers' perception of the discretion available to them to their work satisfaction. Perceived discretion is measured for two sectors of work experience: first, discretion surrounding actual job performance; and second, discretion involving participation in the world of work. The major conclusion suggested by the evidence presented is that job performance discretion is less significantly related to work satisfaction than workers' perceived discretion as to where and at what job they work.

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WORK DISCRETION AND WORK SATISFACTION: A STUDY OF BRITISH FACTORY WORKERS

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Among the range of analytical problems addressed by industrial sociologists, one conspicuous concern has been the voluntary and necessary characteristics of contractual work (Dubin, 1959:1-9). Central to this concern are the adverse social psychological effects of functional specialization (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965:58-63). It is generally assumed that workers in highly specialized jobs experience less autonomy or discretion and, consequently, that they are more dissatisfied with work than those in less specialized jobs.

Numerous studies have been undertaken which examine this thesis (notable examples include Walker & Guest, 1952; Katz, 1954; Chinoy, 1955; Blauner, 1964; Kornhauser, 1965; Turner & Lawrence, 1965; Goldthorpe et. al., 1968). These studies typically describe the actual and/or perceived constraints that limit workers' job performance discretion and then examine the relationship between discretion and various indices of work satisfaction. Unfortunately, the results of these studies have been inconclusive and sometimes even contradictory (contrast for example the findings of Blauner, 1964, with Goldthorpe et. al., 1968). A growing body of research literature suggests that non-job factors may be more significantly related to work satisfaction than actual or perceived job performance discretion (see MacKinney, et. al., 1962; Goldthorpe et. al., 1968; Hulin & Blood, 1968; Hulin, 1971).

This paper reports the results of one portion of a larger research survey of industrial workers and provides the opportunity to bring additional data to

bear on the relationship between perceived discretion and work satisfaction. It also goes a step further than many previous studies concerned almost exclusively with perceived job performance discretion, and explores in addition workers' perceptions of their discretion with regard to their participation in the work institution. More specifically, this paper examines the relative implications for work satisfaction of perceived job discretion as well as of the perceived discretion that industrial workers have with respect to whether or not they work, where they work, and at what jobs they are employed.

Research Procedures

Data were gathered during 1969 in a survey of 5,274 industrial workers employed in six factories located in England, Scotland, and Wales. The principal research instrument was a 153 item questionnaire. The response rate was 61% with 3,193 workers returning a completed questionnaire. While the majority of respondents were low skilled and worked on production lines, both sexes were equally distributed, and workers of varying age and tenure of employment were well represented (see Hedley, 1971:24-28).

Measurement

The main variables examined here are job performance discretion, work participation discretion, and work satisfaction. A discussion of their measurement follows.

Job Performance Discretion

This paper uses the term discretion to refer to what previous researchers have variously, and often interchangeably, labeled, among other things, discretion, autonomy, independence, and freedom from control. We are specifically interested in workers' perceptions of their latitude of choice behavior at work.

As noted at the outset, many studies have drawn attention to the possible

implications of job performance discretion for work satisfaction. Here attention has centered primarily on workers' actual or perceived discretion in things like personal thoughts, communication, relief opportunities, work variety, physical movement, work speed, slack time, and attention requirements. Our questionnaire included eight items to measure workers' perceived discretion in these features of their jobs. These items and the distribution of responses to each are as follows:

1. I can talk to the people around me when I'm working: (N = 2808)

   92% Yes
   8% No

2. I can think about things other than my job while actually working: (N = 2973)

   82% Most or some of the time.
   18% Never or hardly ever.

3. In working at my job: (N = 2794)

   48% I can stop working when I need to.
   52% I must wait to be relieved before I can stop working.

4. In my job: (N = 2959)

   46% I have a chance to do many different things.
   54% I do the same thing all the time.

5. I can move around the factory while doing my job: (N = 2973)

   32% Yes
   68% No

6. In my job there are: (N = 2634)

   25% Slack periods when I can do what I want.
   75% No breaks, except for lunch and tea.

7. My job requires that I work at a certain speed: (N = 2948)

   21% No
   79% Yes

8. My job requires that I watch my machine or whatever I'm doing: (N = 2601)

   6% Now and then.
   94% All or most of the time.

An important observation here is that even though these workers were employed predominantly on production lines, nevertheless they varied considerably in their responses to the above items. Whereas the vast majority reported discretion in their personal thoughts and in talking to others, most also reported little or no discretion in movement, work speed, slack periods, and watching their work. Furthermore, responses to the items pertaining to relief opportunities and work variety were about equally split.

Work Participation Discretion

Measures involving whether or not people would work given sufficient income, the choice of where to work and at what job constitute our operational definition of work participation discretion. Here, attention is focused on the perceived discretion available in the larger institution of work. Although few studies have examined this facet of discretion, the repeated observations of several students of work concerning the time industrial workers spend thinking and talking about what they would do if they did not have to work and about the availability of alternative employment suggest that this type of discretion may be significantly related to work satisfaction (see, for example, Chinoy, 1952; Friedmann & Havighurst, 1954; Guest, 1954; Morse & Weiss, 1955).

In order to explore this possibility empirically, the following four items were included in our questionnaire:

1. I came to work here because: (N = 2957)

   87% It was my best choice available.
   13% I didn't know where else to find a job.

2. As far as working is concerned, I believe that: (N = 2927)

   50% You can usually find a job that you like.
   50% You have to work whether you like it or not.

3. As I see it, people like me: (N = 2789)

   49% Can choose where they work and the kind of work they want to do.
   51% Have to take what comes along.

4. If I won enough money on 'the pools' to live comfortably: (N = 3028)

   36% I would work anyway.
   64% I would stop working.

It is important to note here that because of the lack of empirical precedents for measuring preceived discretion in this sector of work experience, the first three of the above items were expressly developed for this research. Furthermore, although these three items were not originally meant to differentiate between different types of work participation discretion, the pattern of responses to them suggests that they do. Whereas the majority indicated that they "chose" to work in their present company, the responses were evenly split on the two items including a referent to the kind of work or job people do. Thus, it may be that workers perceive greater discretion in where they work than in what job they do. Given that these are exploratory items, however, this is offered solely as a possibility for further study and not as a research conclusion.

In contrast to the first three work discretion items, the fourth was adopted from studies of the meaning of work or, more specifically, commitment to work conducted among American workers (see Kaplan, et. al., 1972) and our interpretation of this item is consistent with earlier ones. However, the responses we received are not. Faced with the prospect of independent wealth, the majority of respondents in this study indicated that they would quit working, i.e., that work for them was a matter of financial necessity. The majority of respondents in the earlier American studies, however, reported

that they would continue working, i.e., that work for them was a matter of choice rather than financial necessity.

Work Satisfaction

In designing items to measure work satisfaction, the traditional interpretation was adopted (see Price, 1972:156-7). In other words, workers' overall affective responses to work range along a continuum from extreme satisfaction to extreme dissatisfaction. Two items were included in the questionnaire to measure this concept. The first asked workers how satisfied they were with their jobs, while the second asked them to evaluate the companies or "works" in which they were employed. These items and the distribution of responses to each are as follows:

1. Overall, how do you feel about your job -- the things you actually do at work? (N = 3098)

   14% Very satisfied
   62% Satisfied
   14% Indifferent
    6% Dissatisfied
    3% Very dissatisfied

2. Overall, how do you feel about this works? (N = 3065)

    9% The best
   42% Better than most
   45% About average
    3% Worse than most
    1% The worst

Clearly, most industrial workers represented in this study indicated that they were satisfied with both their jobs and with their companies ("works"). Given reviews of the satisfaction research, this finding is not surprising. Referring to Blauner's review (1969:247), for example, he concludes that, "...the vast majority of workers in virtually all occupations and industries, are moderately or highly satisfied, rather than dissatisfied with their jobs." Similar conclusions have been reached by other reviewers. Herzberg et. al.

(1957), Robinson (1958), and Robinson and Connors (1964) all report an average of only thirteen percent of workers expressing a negative attitude toward their jobs.

Analysis

The discussion to follow is based primarily on an analysis of the fourteen items presented above and their interrelations. Table 1 presents the Gamma coefficients summarizing these interrelations. Gamma was chosen as the

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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appropriate summary measure since all items are interpreted as ordinal measures. In addition, Gamma can be interpreted either as a symmetrical measure or as an asymmetrical measure under the conditions of weak monotonicity (Leik and Gove, 1969:697-702). Thus, it is appropriately used both for assessing the relationships between items measuring the same variable and for exploring the relationships between items measuring different variables, i.e., only one measure of association is needed. Finally, Gamma is "margin-free" (Mueller, Schuessler, and Costner, 1970:286) and its interpretation is thus unaffected by the marginal distributions on the items we used.

Guttman-Lingoes Smallest Space Analysis I (see Bloombaum, 1970) was used to represent visually the ordinal structure underlying the matrix of Gamma coefficients. This analysis revealed that the fourteen items could be represented adequately in two dimensions (coefficeint of alienation = .14). Figure 1 presents the two-dimensional Smallest Space solution.

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Insert Figure 1 About Here

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Two things should be noted with respect to Figure 1. First, each item is labeled by both a number and a key word or phrase signifying the area or areas of discretion it appears to measure. For example, whereas the first work discretion item clearly measures workers' perceived discretion with respect to the "company" they work for, the response categories to the second item in this group contain the dual referents "job" and "work", and so on. Second, the solid lines linking items were obtained by Elementary Linkage Analysis (McQuitty, 1957) of the Gamma matrix and they indicate empirically derived clusters. Dotted lines are used to indicate points of departure of these empirically derived clusters from the clusters we expected to observe based on our above discussion of job performance and work participation discretion.

Results

Three important conclusions are suggested by Figure 1. First, the eight items used to measure perceived job discretion do not fall into one cluster as expected, but comprise two separate clusters of items. One cluster consists of items measuring perceived discretion in relief, variety, movement, speed, slack time, and watching one's work, with the central item being movement. Further analysis suggested that the items in this cluster were not only significantly interrelated, but they also appeared to be related to whether or not respondents worked on production lines. This is revealed more clearly in Table 2 which presents Gamma coefficients summarizing the relationship of each job discretion item to production line mechanization.

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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The second cluster of job discretion items consists of questions measuring perceived discretion in thinking about things other than one's job and talking to others. Although we present no evidence for this, perceived discretion in these areas is probably a function of noise, distance, and the "mental" content of one's job.

The second conclusion suggested by Figure 1 is that, contrary to expectations, only three of the work discretion items comprised a cluster. The fourth item, "If I won enough money...", fell into the first cluster of job discretion items by virtue of its relation to the item concerned with slack time. Although this might simply be a spurious result, inspection of these two items suggests that respondents may have interpreted the "money" item in a different manner than intended. Whereas we intended this item to ask respondents whether or not they would quit working altogether, some may simply have viewed it as asking them whether or not they would stop what they were doing at the time and take a break. This would account for its relation to the slack time question and it might also underly the inconsistency we noted earlier between the responses we received to this item and the responses received in earlier studies. Because of this potential ambiguity, this item is not treated in subsequent discussions. We include it to this point only to caution future researchers interested in using this or a similar item in their studies.

In contrast to the "money" item, the three interrelated work discretion items more clearly measured respondents' perceptions of their discretion in where and at what job they worked. Further analysis here suggested that respondents' perceptions in this area were significantly related to local job market conditions. This is shown more clearly in Table 3 which presents the relations of each item in this cluster to whether or not the respondents worked

in regions with high or low alternative employment opportunities. As can be seen, respondents working in areas with many alternative employment opportunities

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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were more likely to choose the discretionary response to each of these work discretion items than respondents working in an area with few alternative employment opportunities, particularly if these items reflected the type of work or job in which people are engaged as opposed to the company in which they are employed.

The third and perhaps most important conclusion suggested by Figure 1 is that perceived discretion in where and at what job respondents work is more significantly related to work satisfaction than perceived job performance discretion, but even here the observed relations are, at best, moderate. The Gamma coefficients summarizing the relations of the eight job discretion items to job and company satisfaction varied between -0.09 and 0.22, with the latter coefficient summarizing the association of perceived work variety to job satisfaction. The comparable coefficients for the three items measuring work participation discretion varied between .21 and .50, with the strongest associations being observed between the "company" item and both satisfaction items. Finally, although space prevents the inclusion of the relevant data, it should also be noted that this third conclusion was not modified when these relations were partitioned and examined separately by sex, age, length of service, skill level, production line mechanization, and availability of alternative employment opportunities.

Conclusions

From Marx and Weber to the present, many students of work have pointed

out that factory work, and particularly production line work, robs industrial workers of discretion or control over their job-related behavior (see Bell, 1962:355-92). Where handcraft presumably once provided workers with the opportunity to choose when, where, and under what conditions they worked, modern industrial work does not. Numerous studies undertaken among industrial in recent years have tended to confirm this observation (see Blauner, 1964; Blauner, 1969:223-49; Meissner, 1969). The findings reported in this paper are consistent in many respects with this earlier research, particularly with the conclusion that workers on production lines perceive less discretion than non-production line workers in relief opportunities, physical movement, work speed, slack time, and work variety. However, our findings also suggest that not only is there substantial variation in workers' perceptions of the job discretion available to them, but also there is considerable variability in how workers perceive what employment opportunities are open to them.

More important, the findings of this research suggest that perceived job performance discretion is only marginally related to work satisfaction. Consonant with the growing literature which suggests that factors other than job discretion may contribute more substantially to work satisfaction (see MacKinney et. al., 1962; Goldthorpe et. al., 1968; Hulin & Blood, 1968; Hulin, 1971), our data indicate that work participation discretion, i.e., discretion with regard to where one works and at what kind of job, is a stronger explanatory factor of satisfaction than whether or not one perceives discretion in the actual performance of his job.

Finally, the data we have examined suggest that industrial sociologists concerned with the voluntary and necessary characteristics of work may do well to examine workers' perceived discretion in a broader range of work experiences.

Our analysis tends to substantiate the speculation that people's general orientations, particularly work-related orientations, may have more to do with their specific attitudes toward their job and company than the concrete conditions surrounding their work performance.

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TABLE 1. GAMMA MATRIX FOR JOB DISCRETION, WORK DISCRETION, AND WORK SATISFACTION ITEMS

Items	Job Performance Discretion								Work Participation Discretion				Work Satisfaction	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	1	2
Job Performance Discretion														
1. Talk	0.00													
2. Think	0.62	0.00												
3. Relief	0.15	0.11	0.00											
4. Variety	0.28	0.04	0.37	0.00										
5. Move	0.38	-0.03	0.74	0.59	0.00									
6. Slack	0.30	0.30	0.63	0.45	0.65	0.00								
7. Speed	0.28	0.10	0.63	0.48	0.64	0.61	0.00							
8. Watch	0.26	0.40	0.39	0.33	0.64	0.51	0.44	0.00						
Work Participation Discretion														
1. Company	-0.02	-0.10	-0.04	0.25	-0.01	-0.07	0.02	-0.24	0.00					
2. Job/Work	0.11	-0.03	0.02	0.28	0.08	0.10	0.06	-0.15	0.55	0.00				
3. Job/Company	0.15	-0.02	0.10	0.31	0.22	0.18	0.06	-0.12	0.55	0.67	0.00			
4. Work	-0.13	-0.12	0.05	0.15	0.07	0.29	0.07	-0.02	0.08	0.24	0.10	0.00		
Work Satisfaction														
1. Company Satisfaction	0.06	-0.03	0.02	0.13	0.17	0.13	0.12	-0.05	0.50	0.32	0.21	0.21	0.73	0.00
2. Job Satisfaction	0.10	-0.02	0.04	0.22	0.18	0.13	0.11	-0.09	0.50	0.39	0.22	0.16	0.00	

Table 2. Gamma Coefficients Summarizing Relation of Production Line Mechanization to Job Discretion Items

Task Performance Discretion Item:	Production Line Mechanization
3. Relief	-0.76
5. Move	-0.74
6. Speed	-0.57
4. Variety	-0.52
7. Slack	-0.43
8. Watch	-0.26
2. Talk	-0.16
1. Think	0.07

Caution should be exercised in interpreting the coefficients in this table. Production line mechanization was measured at the department level by observing whether the majority of respondents in a department worked on a production line (see Hedley, 1971: 28-32). Thus, the relationships summarized here are the relationships between the job discretion perceived by each worker and the production line mechanization of the department he or she worked in. They do not refer to the relationship between each worker's perceptions and whether or not he or she actually worked on a production line.

Table 3. Percentage of Perceived Work Participation Discretion by Employment Opportunities

Work Participation Discretion Items	Employment Opportunities* High	Low
1. I came to work here because it was my best choice available	88% (2726)	79% (231)
2. As far as working is concerned, I believe that you can usually find a job that you like	51 (2699)	40 (228)
3. As I see it, people like me can choose where they work and the kind of work they do	51 (2576)	29 (213)

*Employment opportunities were determined by ranking respondents according to the area in which their companies were located. Respondents were considered to have high employment opportunities if their company was located in or near a large metropolitan center. Five out of the six companies surveyed met this criterion. The other company was located in a small village in an area relatively devoid of other manufacturing enterprises.

FIGURE 1. SPACE DIAGRAM OF JOB DISCRETION, WORK DISCRETION, AND WORK SATISFACTION ITEMS (COEFFICIENT OF ALIENATION = .14)